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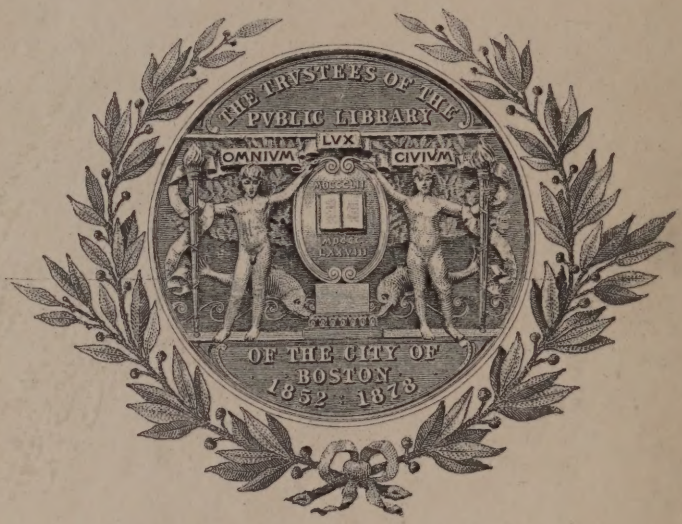
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A THREE YEARS' MINISTRY.

A

SERMON

PREACHED FEBRUARY 9, 1845,

AT THE

7551.357

Purchase Street Congregational Church,

BEING THE

THIRD ANNIVERSARY OF HIS ORDINATION,

BY J. I. T. COOLIDGE, PASTOR.

NOT PUBLISHED.

BOSTON:
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RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED

TO THE

Purchase Street Congregational Church and Society,

BY ITS PASTOR.

SERMON.

THEREFORE WATCH, AND REMEMBER THAT BY THE SPACE OF THREE YEARS I CEASED NOT TO WARN EVERY ONE NIGHT AND DAY WITH TEARS.
Acts, 20: 31.

THREE years ago this day, an event took place memorable forever in my own experience and in that of many who now hear me. Accepting your request to become your preacher and pastor, I stood trembling with my hand upon the ark of the Lord, and solemn voices were in mine ear and echoing in my heart. The words of sage counsel, of weighty charge, of kind sympathy from my elder brethren, as they fell from their earnest lips, alternately depressed and elevated my soul. Deep solicitude and strong emotions then attested to me that the recording angel was writing in his book my duty to God, to Christ, and to you, my people. With hardly more than a boy's knowledge and experience, I assumed the solemn obligations and responsibilities of my sacred office. Three years have passed since that day — to me, not rapidly, so much has been crowded into them of joy and grief, of pleasure and pain, of hope and success, of hope and *disappointment*. Coming from the seclusion of my prepara-

tory studies, at one step a new world was opened before me — a world of noble action, of close contact with the deep, solemn experiences of a great congregation — a world of conflicts and changes, of sorrows and trials, in which mine own were to be almost absorbed and forgotten. It seems to me, as I look back, as if I had dwelt among you these many years, and the scenes of my boyhood and early youth come to me as the dreams of a far off period.

I propose to pass in review very familiarly this portion of my ministry among you.

Three years have passed; and the leaves of the Church Register which then lay blank before me, already declare the many vicissitudes of human life. They speak of parents, — in the full yet secret trembling of their hearts, deeply conscious that the child born unto them is the charge as well as gift of God, and humbly praying the divine blessing on the fresh tie that binds them to one another and to heaven, — who have stood at this altar, with the holy associations of the sanctuary around them, or at the domestic shrine, amid household influences, and offered their children, that the baptismal water, emblem of purity and initiation into the church of the First-Born, might fall upon the infant brow, and God consecrate them from their birth unto himself. Upon the foreheads of twenty-three, in the fresh morning of their being, have I with deep and solemn joy beheld the emblematical waters glisten,

like the early dew, and lifted them on my prayer to the bosom of their Eternal Father, to the enfolding arms of the blessed Saviour, and besought upon them the sanctifying influences of the Holy Spirit. Beautiful rite! Beautiful as infancy itself! and how touching in its simplicity! How solemn, yet benign an inauguration into the serious mysteries of existence. I needs must express my regret and wonder, "that (in the words of another) any parent should forego this religious opportunity; should suffer what ought to be and would be a sacred epoch in their domestic life to remain a blank space, through indifference or procrastination, or an idea that they are not absolutely required to have their children baptized by strict and positive authority. Do they want strict and positive authority, for a devout dedication and engagement like this? Why? Cannot they come to the font with a step of affectionate freedom? Did not the Saviour say 'baptize,' and did he not love children? To my heart this is abundant authority for a service, which is perpetually connecting Christ and little children together, in the sight of angels and men; and feeling certain that their names are not blotted from the Lamb's book of life in heaven, I love to see them recorded in the book of his church on earth."

And not upon infant brows alone have I rejoiced to place the holy sign. But at this altar, in the deep emotion of their hearts, in the strong and

devoted purposes of their souls, thirty-one have stood and dedicated themselves unto the solemn work of their lives, humbly imploring that help from above which is always poured down into the meekly trusting spirit. May the Father have been with, and blessed them! May Christ have come and taken up his abode with them! May the Holy Spirit have breathed continually upon their heart-strings, attuning them to heavenly melodies, and blessing them with that peace of God which passeth all understanding.

Here, too, at this holy altar, consecrated by so many prayers, and amid all the solemn associations of the house of God, or again in the home of early affection, in the bosom of loving and sympathizing friends, joining in the hopes and prayers of the season, I have united forty-eight in the holy estate of marriage. Beautiful and blessed institution! Which setteth the solitary in families; which gives to woman a firm protector; to man, a gentle, sympathizing friend and counsellor; a heart that beats a ready response to all his joys and griefs; a comforter that breathes the more sweetly and consolingly, when misfortune and disappointment have sealed every other earthly fountain. Is it not meet, when hearts are throbbing with the gushing tide of sweet affection, and beating high with brightest hopes; when the fulness and purity of their love give assurance that God has indeed joined them together; is it not most fitting that solemn words

be spoken, fervent prayers be breathed, the divine blessing invoked? Is it not meet that holiest influences should throng around that hour, when they stand on the threshold of a new experience, and *as one* must meet and endure the joys and sorrows, the light and darkness, the life and death, the mingled ingredients in every mortal cup? It is an hour of joy and congratulation, an hour, when high festivity is not unbecoming; when gloom and desponding sadness should be banished far. But it is also an hour of deep solemnity; when double responsibilities are incurred, and the happiness of the one is forever and without reserve intrusted to the keeping of the other; an hour when a new world of purest happiness is opened, or when an irremediable step is taken in a path of bitterest pain and anguish. Well is it then, I say, that the holiest influences should gather round and mingle with the flowers, and the music, and the dance; that words of weightiest significance, and wisest counsel, and calm devotion, should form the deep bass of the choral song of friendly hearts. Many of those I have thus united have gone out from among us; but it is pleasing to know they have not lost their love for this sanctuary, and often revisit with joy this, their early home. God's blessing on them all! And as year after year passes over them, may it not wear, but only brighten the bond, woven of the eternal elements of our faith and holding them as one, though the grave shall open between them.

Here, also, have I received, from month to month, into the church of the First-Born, into the fellowship of the church of Christ, fifty-five. While I thank God, and take courage for the promise of these, would, brethren, the number were larger. Would I could say that all, who keep holy time within these walls, sate down as brethren of one heart to commemorate their dying Master's love, to call up his glorious image, to press near to his feet, to lean upon that bosom, beating with divine compassion and sympathy for all human experience. I say not, you do not this, and feel not this, every where. I say not there is no communion or fellowship with Christ elsewhere than at his table. I say not it is the only test of discipleship, or the greatest. I count him high in the regard of his God and his Saviour, who through faith in the Lord Jesus lives and breathes his spirit, whether he be in or out of his visible church. But I say, as I look upon this table, its holy associations, its tender remembrances, its speaking symbols, its blessed and sanctifying influences; as I feel more and more the infinite depth of love in him who hallows it; I say, my heart's desire and prayer for you, my people, is to see you all; — not a few of the great congregation, but young men and maidens, in the freedom and buoyancy of their fresh and joyous hearts, when life seems an unbroken holyday; the middle-aged, perplexed with thronging cares, tried by manifold temptations, exposed to the fearful dangers of the world, yet aspiring through all towards

their high calling; the aged, in the decline of their days, as the shadows of earth lengthen, and the coming heaven dawns brightly in the east; — to see you all, with your varied experiences, sitting here as one great brotherhood, the holy sacrament the sign and pledge of your mutual hope and aspiration, your mutual love and tender sympathy. Though this desire is not realized, let me, through the promise of the past, indulge the bright vision as a quickening impulse for the future.

One other leaf of the register remains; the leaf that, like a tolling bell, tells of the departure of those who have met with us from Sabbath to Sabbath, but whom in this world we shall see no more. Our burial service has been thirty-seven times read over the graves of infancy and youth, manhood and age. "Those silent columns of names! They preach more eloquently than human lips, of the sundering of the strongest ties, of the dispersion of families, of the changes of life, of the vanity of earthly hopes, of the instability of all that is earthly." Yes, my friends, this page always awakens in me the deepest emotion. It is with a trembling hand I turn to it, to record each new name. The parent's tear falls again, as I look upon the infant's name — angel messenger from the spirit land, just speaking of love, just breathing of heaven, and then reascending to its own bright home. The children's sorrow, in which I have sympathized, and endeavored, however incompetently, to soothe, comes back to me,

and flows afresh, as I read the name of the venerated and loved parent. The mourning family is around me again, looking to me for consolation in the anguish of their spirits, or upward with meek faith to heaven, where dwells the great Father of all, as my eye falls upon the name of daughter and sister, or son and brother. I think of those whose age added to the sanctity of this house, and who were gathered to their rest in due season, like a shock of corn fully ripe; of those who were called in the day of their manhood's vigor and usefulness; of the young men and maidens, in their pride and beautiful promise; of the infant, sweetly falling asleep in its unstained purity, and leaving a rich legacy of blessed and saving thoughts in the parents' hearts. They are gone to that world — to us a hope, to them a presence. Peace be to their ashes! forgotten be their infirmities, honored be their virtues! God grant they may now be forming part of that band of the redeemed in the heavenly courts, who praise the Father day and night, and bless the Lamb, who has taken away their sins. And brethren, you that have been tried with affliction's pangs, grieve not too much. Is it an innocent child you mourn? The arms of the Saviour enfold it. Is it brother or sister, or revered parent? Could they speak to us would they not say, "I am in the hands of the infinitely good God. Dishonor not the good and blessed one, my Father and your Father, by any distrust or doubt. Mourn for me, remember me, as I too

remember you, long for you, but mourn with humble patience, calm, sustaining faith."

Forcibly, my people, does this lengthening column remind us, that we know not the day nor the hour. Let it teach us the need of that constant preparation of spirit, with which death cannot come too suddenly or too soon. The book stands open; what names shall be added thereto before we stand again at this anniversary, yours or mine, we know not. Let us remember that another book is open in the hands of the Lord, and that all will be well with us, if our names are written *there.*

Such has been the history of the three last years, as recorded in the register of our church. It is a solemn history of joys and sorrows, of holy vows and trembling consecrations; and good is it to make serious pause, and gather up its sacred lessons. But all the solemn events of our life do not find note therein. During this period, how varied the experience we have each encountered. Many have been our joys, and griefs, and trials, that come not forth to court the public sympathy, but which silently and deeply imprint their lines on the unseen register of the soul. In our habitations, the voice of mirth and gladness has been heard, and all been merry as a marriage bell. Music, and dancing, and feasting, and young and exultant hearts have been there, and it has seemed as if the mountain of our prosperity could never be moved. But suddenly the scene

has changed, and stillness has fallen upon the household. The noiseless step and whispered tone have told of rapid and dangerous sickness. The long night-watch has been kept by the fevered pillow of the restless invalid. It has seemed in the solemn pauses of the night, as if the last pulse must soon heave. But God has been gracious; the sick has revived and is with us to-day in health and strength. There have been slight pains and light diseases, coming to us as gentle mementoes of our frailty and dependence. Few of us but have been reminded, with greater or less power, that we are strangers and pilgrims on the earth, that God is our home, and heaven our resting-place. Good is it, if these remembrancers have been hearkened unto, if they have brought nearer to us, to our affections and aspirations, the eternal things of our spirit's being.

Suffer me now briefly to review the tone of my preaching.

I have sought to preach the word, to preach it in good faith, and to the best of my ability. I have ever been mindful of the words of him who laid solemn charge upon me. "Devote," said he, "the best powers God has bestowed on you; and the best, most earnest, and diligent cultivation of them to the pulpit. Not intellect only, and yet that to the utmost stretch of exertion. Let your sermons be written from the topmost level of your intellectual capacities. Let them not come from the mere dregs and chips of a mind otherwise interested and exhausted, but be the

best things intellectually you do or can do. Yet not intellect only — that alone would freeze and starve the church — but intellect warmed by all tender affections and readiest sympathies, spiritualized by faith, sanctified by piety. There must be this combination." And this combination, brethren, I have endeavored to present to you. In order to prepare for the work of the pulpit, I have made the duties of the pastor subservient to those of the preacher, believing that if either is to be left undone, it should not be the latter. I have felt that he who sustains the holy office of preacher comes into the immediate and unveiled spiritual presence of man, and that he should have his ear open to the slightest whisper from that world of the mind and heart. When it is overshadowed with affliction, when it is brightened with prosperity, when it is hardened by worldliness, when it is stained with sin, when it moves on its equable course, yet developing the experience of immortal creatures, he should be ready to speak to it with words that come forth from the depths of his own soul. And what themes of unutterable interest are his! He must speak of God — of his power, his wisdom, his holiness, his righteousness, his beneficence, his boundless mercy. He must speak of Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Redeemer — of his unequalled teachings, his wondrous deeds, his costly sacrifice, his glorious triumph. He must speak of the soul — of its exalted powers, its deep degradations, its fearful peril, its way of escape

provided in the gospel, its essential happiness, its immortal hope, its promised heaven. He must speak of life — of its conflicts and changes, of its stern trials and temptations, of its supreme interest and its sublime purpose, of its awful dangers, and its glorious victories. He must tell every man, that he stands upon the very field of a solemn and momentous probation, and open to him the infinite future in which he is to live and to act, to think and to feel, to enjoy or to suffer forever. He must declare the brotherhood of man, break down the walls of partition which birth, or pride, or wealth, or color, have built, and awaken that large charity which embraces in its ample folds, the suffering, the degraded, the down-trodden, the wronged slave, wherever he may dwell; here, at our feet, in the neighboring South, or at the farthest extremities of the earth. And to speak on all these affecting themes, to speak with power, he must bring no grave essays, no rhapsody, no cold, naked, theological disquisitions, but a doctrine interwoven with every fibre of the human heart — no bare, abstract argument, but an argument whose train is set on fire from heaven. He must speak from the depths of meditation and experience, from a feeling of "woe is me, if I preach not" — from an inspiration that burned while he mused.

Thus thinking and feeling, my brethren, I have stood in this desk — not for the sake of affording you a morning's or a day's entertainment — not that these walls might enclose a throng of curious spectators — but simply, heartily, and earnestly to declare Christian

truth and duty, in their length and breadth and heighth and depth. I have spoken as plainly as I knew how of actual sins and wickedness; not dealing in abstractions, but striving to come close to every man's heart and conscience. Conscious of my own sins and inward conflicts, I have sought the way of escape; and having found it only in Christ, the appointed way, I have endeavored to lead you to the same Redeemer. Faith in Christ, not as a teacher only or an example, but as the Head of the Church, the express image of the Father, the God-appointed Saviour of souls; faith that allies to him, that takes him into the heart, appropriates him, so that we can say, 'the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me,' this has been the peculiar doctrine I have preached unto you. Faith in *Christ* — not simply in Christianity as a system, this, unweariedly to myself, monotonously perhaps to you, have I presented again and again in the desk, in the vestry, in the church meeting, in the bible class, wherever two or three have been gathered together for holy ends, as the great appointed means of human salvation. May God grant that my words have been with power, sinking deep into the soil of your hearts and springing up into a glorious harvest of holy thoughts and immortal aspirations, of blessed and divine affections! My purpose has been accomplished, if this work has been effected. Most sad and lamentable failure has it been, if you my brother, cannot feel it has been

done in your heart. May God have saved me from being unto you a pleasant voice singing you to sleep upon the infinitely solemn truths of your being. Yet let me say, the preacher alone, though angel from heaven, can do but little. All will be vain unless your minds coöperate. "One might sooner strive to support the world, than uplift a dead or listless soul to heaven. If the hearer will be cold, all will be cold, and the most glowing words will fall quenched in the congregation."

Such has been our history for the last three years. We have been a happy, prosperous, harmonious society, and the lines could not have fallen to me in pleasanter places. Many and great have been my deficiencies — no one more conscious of them than myself. It is with a bowed head, I look back upon the past. And there are times when I would gladly lay down my commission. When I think of the noble opportunities of the pulpit, of the mighty engine it might and should be for the pulling down of the strong-holds of sin, and building up the kingdom of God in the waste places of the human heart, and then behold how poorly those opportunities are here met, how weakly that instrument is here wielded; when I think of standing here Sabbath after Sabbath, striving to speak upon the high matters of human happiness and destiny; upon sublime, infinitely momentous realities — realities face to face with which we must sooner or later be brought, whether we would or not, and behold the little im-

pression made, the small fruit of the labor, I am ready almost to lay aside my office and seek some humbler and less conspicuous service. Deeply do I feel my obligations, and wish you to feel them with me. Suffer me not to remain any longer than I make some satisfactory approach to their discharge. For I say with another, upon the ground of personal comfort, I should decline standing here for a day. And you would be blameworthy in desiring me to remain upon any other ground than conscience and service rendered. By such a course, you would be injured, for such service you can command; and I should be injured, for I have resolved in some way, if not at this post at some other, truly to serve my fellowmen. And this aim of my life, if God give me strength, shall be broken by no complaisance or indulgence. But I should do wrong not to thank you for your patience and forbearance. I cannot ask you to be kinder than you have been; and many of you, who from the first have stood beside me, and by your counsel, your sympathy, your ready coöperation, have borne me up and on, oftentimes when nigh to fainting, I cannot repay. The debt of gratitude is written on my heart. I can only in return devote myself to greater faithfulness to that standard in duty, below which how much I have fallen, no one can be as sensible as myself.

And now brethren, we enter upon a new period of our sacred relation. How shall it be to our mutual edification? By a hearty coöperation alone of pastor

and people. My time, my best strength is yours. Let me be a friend, a trusted counsellor to you all. I will be true to your reliance, and sacred shall be the pure confidence of our souls.

Parents, aid me in your families, in the religious culture of yourselves and your children. Young men and young women, aid me by devoting the bright season of your lives, before the evil days come, to the cause of Christ and his religion. And all of you, my people, aid me, I pray you, by your mutual sympathy and brotherly love, by your earnest endeavors, by word, by work, by example to build up in your own souls and in those around you, the reign of righteousness and true holiness. Then shall this Church of Christ not only have a name that it liveth, but be penetrated by the life of the master and bear much fruit, as the branch is green and fruitful through the life and strength the vine supplies.